

Ears Open, Mouth Open, Sleeves Rolled Up – That's How You Learn Properly

Sermon for Palm Sunday

Sermon Text: Isaiah 50:4-9



The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. ⁵The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. ⁶I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. ⁷But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have

set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. ⁸He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. ⁹Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Parents have a hard time because they must constantly experience their words leading to nothing or being completely ignored: “Peter! You need to get up! It’s already after 7 – you need to get to school!”, the mom calls to her son. “No, I’m not going today!” Peter groans from bed. “Why not?” the mom angrily asks. “Because the other kids annoy me.”

Talking, listening, and acting are the basic elements of learning. The first step is to be prepared to listen in the first place. If what you hear literally “goes in one ear and out the other,” this doesn’t just show an inability to listen – it also points to a lack of willingness, because whoever truly wants to learn must be open to a committed relationship. And that also is a part of the willingness to change. One must be ready to put their own thoughts aside to make room for what they hear, for new knowledge which leads to new actions. Something fundamental gets out of whack when someone hears something but isn’t prepared to put what they’ve heard into practice or if they aren’t convinced that what they’ve heard makes sense or is good – and consequently, they then don’t trust their teacher. At the beginning of Creation, talking and listening was no problem. Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God and His will. A direct and undamaged relationship existed that allowed them to learn something new every day – with love, imagination, and excitement. Just like every teacher hopes for. Yet we know that this relationship would be broken. With the fall into sin, it wasn’t just the relationship with God that was shattered but also communication with Him. Adam and Eve could no longer – and no longer wanted to – hear God and with that, listening to each other also broke down. Their first reaction was to blame each other. Then just one generation later, the bitter consequences of “not listening” became apparent – their children became mortal enemies. That is the state of humanity and as a result, the condition of our listening, speaking, and acting.

Isaiah the prophet knew that all too well. He constantly had to talk and his words often fell upon deaf ears. Yet already from these experiences, Isaiah is given an insight into the distant future. He also carried within him the ability of Adam and Eve to hear and understand God’s Word in fragments. But Isaiah recognizes that there is someone who would come in the future who would be different: Jesus. Isaiah sees Jesus – a man who lives as man was always meant to: open to God and listening to His instructions. Jesus repeatedly refers to His own listening: “I declare to the world what I have heard from Him [God].” (John 8:26b) Through His nature and origin, Jesus is unconditionally open to God. This openness leads directly to unconditional obedience. For Him, listening is inseparable from actions – without contradiction and without compromise because you can’t be open to God and then do something completely different. Jesus’ freedom exists precisely because His is completely bound to God: *though He [Jesus] was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself... He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* (Philippians 2:6-8) If Jesus had wanted to be in charge of Himself, Maundy Thursday would not have become Good Friday. He presumably would have

orchestrated something with the scribes and pharisees and found a compromise. Yet Jesus **listened and obeyed**. “Your will be done” was the guiding principle of His life.

In impressive ways, Isaiah describes all of this – many centuries before Jesus. And yet he describes Jesus’ path to the cross in the tiniest of details: they will hit Him, they will spit on Him, they will whip Him. In spite of all this, He sets His face like a flint – unmoving, steadfast. That means, He remained unaffected by the torture. Not once is hate found in His expression. His entire being is focused on God. Even in suffering, He knows that He is in pure fellowship with God. We see in Jesus’ life that He never once let Himself be dissuaded from taking the path of the cross by His closest friends. With the full knowledge of what was to happen, He got on the donkey and rode into the city visible to everyone – knowing that these same people who now praised Him, would soon torture and crucify Him. Yet He kept His focus on God – “Father, if You are willing...” – it is written all over His face. Yet this close relationship to God is not the entire picture of Jesus’ path. This path doesn’t lead to an even more intensive fellowship with God, but the opposite. Jesus will pass through the abyss of being forsaken by God. He will feel completely abandoned by God. He will cry out from the cross because of this separation: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” An unprecedented scandal of all things, this Jesus – the one who always listened to God, the one who had completely fulfilled God’s Will – this Jesus is now forsaken by God. It is the reverse action to that of Adam and Eve, it’s not the person breaking communication but God Himself. God forsakes Himself, He who was without sin is made a sinner, the Righteous One is declared unrighteous. Yet this wasn’t all for nothing. He did it so that we could again have clear communication with God. Already in Isaiah it becomes clear, the mission of the servant of God is to raise up and comfort the weary. By being crucified between two criminals, Jesus shows that He stands in the middle of human history. Where people are executed out of cruel instinct, religious madness, or incomprehensible hatred, that’s exactly where Jesus is. He doesn’t just stand in solidarity at the side of those who are suffering, He wants to save them. His mission to raise up the weary doesn’t just mean comfort but also triumphing over evil. That which separated us from God is destroyed.

But how can Jesus do all of this? How can He remain obedient to the very end, even when His obedience is not reciprocated? Despite all suffering and despite all contempt, there remains an ultimate invulnerability in Jesus. Even at the great remoteness of God at His crucifixion, Jesus calls out: “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!” And Isaiah writes, the Servant of God will even make many to be accounted righteous from the cross (Isaiah 53:11). Yes, Jesus does that. He pronounces a verdict: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus remains focused on God, even when He is bleeding, even when His heart is breaking, His faith cannot be destroyed, and He says with the words of Isaiah: “Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?” The first light of resurrection is already within these words. Easter doesn’t begin with the physical resurrection of Jesus, it begins with God’s judgment. And so it is for us too. Everything that people do to us or say about us only has a temporary meaning. The last and deciding word is spoken by God – and this word frees us. Through Jesus Christ, God adopts us as His children. And this verdict is already valid. Jesus still intercedes for us today. At the right hand of God, He is completely on our side. He prays for us, in sickness and in health, in life and in death. We are never alone. Through Jesus, we have unbroken communication with God.

The week we are about to start is called Holy Week and in German it’s called *Karwoche*. The word *Kar* originally meant sorrow. We think about the path of suffering Jesus had to endure and yet this week has a wonderful high point: On Maundy Thursday, Jesus is in close fellowship with His disciples. What He says and does has great meaning for each one of us. “This is My body... This is My blood...” With these words, Jesus gives Himself completely for us. Through Him, we have free access to God. Amen.